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Neoliberalism, governance, and the geographies of conditional cash transfers

Political Geography (forthcoming)

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ABSTRACT

This article considers the geographic effects of conditional cash transfer programs (CCTs), focusing specifically on the ways they rework space, modes of production, and State/society relationships. While CCTs appear linked to neoliberal development and biopolitical governance regimes (viz., governmentality), this article highlights the counterintuitive reasons for why CCTs sometimes fail to meet these broader State objectives. More directly, despite obvious tactics of Statecraft behind CCT initiatives, the effects of these programs can in fact undermine their intended governance outcomes. Drawing from case study research in rural northeastern Brazil – where an overwhelming majority of residents receive *Bolsa Família* CCT benefits – this article examines the political geographic changes induced by *Bolsa Família* in a region that has until recently seen very little State presence. By engaging a geographic perspective that focuses on the political and economic effects of CCT programs, this article sheds new light on processes of governance and development in a host of countries throughout the Global South.

Key words: Conditional Cash Transfers; neoliberalism; governance; development; governmentality; Latin America/Brazil

INTRODUCTION

When it comes to ongoing territorial disputes, one of the world's largest lies tucked away in the *sertão* (backlands or hinterlands; often synonymous with desert or outback) of northeastern Brazil (Thomaz, 2011). Located along the Ibiapaba mountain range several kilometers inland from the coast (see Fig. 1), this disputed area – referred to in this article as *Ponta Fina*ⁱ – runs north-south along the shared border between the statesⁱⁱ of Ceará and Piauí. According to a 2008 report conducted by the Cearense Institute of Research and Economic Strategy (IPECE), Ponta Fina encompasses 2,821 square kilometers and has a population of roughly 10,000 people (Sena, 2013). Were Ponta Fina its own state, it would be nearly the size of the US state of Rhode Island. The dispute dates back well into the nineteenth century, when the imperial government of Dom Pedro II redrew the boundary between the two states but never generated precise cartographic coordinates. Since then there has never been a clear border between Ceará and Piauí, and while both states lay claim to much of the Ponta Fina region, neither one has provisioned very well for the local population. Both states appear to want territorial rights, but neither has seemed very interested in developing the region or providing services for the people.

(Figure 1 about here.)

In 2013 I made my first of two extended field visits to this region. The original purpose of this research was to consider 'Stateless' territories and the populations that inhabit them (see for example Hagmann & Korf, 2012; Jones, 2009; Steinberg & Chapman, 2009). What I found, however, was that very few Ponta Fina residents worried about the political or cartographic particularities of the territorial dispute: for example, whether they might be (re)classified as *cearense* or *piauiense*. Instead, what concerned most people was Brazil's *Programa Bolsa Família* (PBF) conditional cash

transfer initiative and the security of this program in the Ponta Fina region. PBF is the primary income source for most families in the area, yet administration of the program is hindered by Ponta Fina's geographic ambiguity. To address PBF and broader issues of food security, one must also address the territorial dispute, bringing to light a mess of geographical entanglements. More directly, conditional cash transfer programs (CCTs) in federative republics like Brazil are administered through state and municipal networks, and when these networks are complicated by ambiguities such as border disputes CCTs face administrative roadblocks. 'State' (i.e., federal) resources cannot be delivered to 'stateless' people. Even more to the point, CCTs produce a host of geographical effects, and in a poor region like Ponta Fina where: a) nearly everyone receives PBF, and; b) the administration of PBF is particularly difficult, the myriad geographies of CCTs are laid especially bare. More than simply putting food on the table in millions of households worldwide, CCTs also have tremendous impacts on space, governance, cartographies, and political economic relationships.

The purpose of this article is to investigate the geographies of CCTs, and more specifically to consider how these programs rework relationships between people, space, economic activity, and the State. While there exists a growing literature on CCTs in the social sciences, relatively few geographers have weighed in on these debates. I attempt here to highlight the value of geographic perspectives in analyses of CCTs, arguing that spatially attuned analytical frameworks provide new insight to the ways CCTs change (and are changed by) processes like governance, neoliberalism, and even cartography. Beginning with an overview of critical research on CCTs, emergent debates connecting CCTs to governance and neoliberalism, and contributions from geographers, I then move on to consider my case study from Ponta

Fina and the geographic effects of Bolsa Família. My findings contribute to existing research linking CCTs with governmentality and neoliberalism (e.g., Corboz, 2013; Ferguson, 2010; Hossain, 2010; Peck, 2011; Peck and Theodore, 2010; Saad-Filho, 2015; Sener, 2015), yet what I also argue is that CCTs induce a host of differentiated effects that undermine State efforts to govern space, implement formalized economies, and create neoliberal citizen-subjects. By interrogating the relationships between CCTs, space, and governance, my hope is that this article opens new pathways for critical geographic research into State-led development initiatives (e.g., Andolina, Radcliffe, and Laurie, 2005; Bebbington & McCourt, 2007; Peck and Theodore, 2015; Roy, 2010, 2012).

CRITICAL RESEARCH OF CONDITIONAL CASH TRANSFER PROGRAMS

In 1995, faced with economic decline and rising levels of hunger, the Mexican government piloted a new anti-poverty initiative aimed at addressing underdevelopment on multiple levels. Called *Progres*a – and later renamed *Oportunidades* – this program sought to address hunger through cash transfers to low-income families. The money, however, came with *conditional* requirements that recipient families make regular visits to health clinics (for checkups and education) and children maintain good attendance at school. Known today as a ‘Conditional Cash Transfer’ (CCT), such programs have since grown immensely popular and have been implemented in dozens of lesser-developed countries worldwide (Ballard, 2013). The world’s largest and perhaps best-known CCT program is Brazil’s *Programa Bolsa Família* (PBF), a merger of smaller and pre-existing CCTs rolled out under the PT (Worker’s Party) in 2003 (Saad-Filho, 2015). Today PBF reaches nearly 14 million households, meaning that more than one-quarter of Brazil’s population – roughly 50 million people – receive the benefit (Campello and Neri, 2013). Families become

eligible if their household income falls below R\$150 per capita per month (USD 55-60), and the amount of money they receive depends on the number of dependents living in the house relative to total household income (Santos, 2013). The program is widely considered one of the PT's most successful (if not also controversial) anti-poverty initiatives, and PBF is credited with helping to significantly reduce income inequality in Brazil over the last decade (Pereira, 2015).

Published research considering the effects of PBF and other CCTs has grown steadily in recent years (Fenwick, 2009; Gupta, 2012; Hall, 2008; Seekings, 2012). The topics of this work range broadly, but general themes include poverty reduction (Fiszbein and Shady, 2009; Handa and Davis, 2006; Soares, Ribas, & Osório, 2010), gender equality (Corboz, 2013; Molyneux, 2007; Molyneux and Thomson, 2011), education and child welfare (Hanlon, Barrientos, & Hulme, 2010; Hossain, 2010; Leroy, Ruel, & Verhofstadt, 2009), and the political economic repercussions of CCT 'conditionalities' (Ballard, 2013; Hall, 2013; Taylor, 2009). In line with studies that examine the biopolitical implications of social spending programs in developing countries (Hickey, 2010; Li, 2007, 2009; Miller and Rose, 2008), researchers have also focused on the ways CCTs intertwine with neoliberal development strategies to create more 'productive,' market-savvy citizen-subjects (Ferguson, 2010; Peck, 2011; Peck and Theodore, 2010). Notes Tania Li, though the benefits of large-scale development projects should not be overlooked in the Global South (viz., reducing hunger, especially in rural areas), they are overwrought with neoliberal governance. She critically unpacks technocratic initiatives aimed at promoting development and environmental conservation in Southeast Asia, connecting them to Foucauldian notions of governmentality: highly technocratic methods of governance where

specific interventions are made to improve the productive capacities of the population, finely tuning their practices “to achieve optimal [productive] results” (Li, 2007: p. 6).

Drawing from Li’s work, Naomi Hossain (2010) argues that like many State development initiatives, CCTs are designed to increase governmentality among poor populations. The poor are formally educated in ways that orient their practices and desires towards development goals, in addition to submitting to the State’s medical gaze and biopolitical strategies (e.g., registration and biometric capture, notification of household and residential change, reporting of income and school attendance, monthly visits to agencies to receive payment). Like other scholars drawing on Foucault (Luccisano, 2006; Meltzer, 2013; Sener, 2015), Hossain scrutinizes CCT programs not so much for their effectiveness at addressing poverty and reducing hunger, but rather for their governance and personal conduct objectives. In line with large-scale development projects (Li, 2007, 2009) and government welfare initiatives (Miller and Rose, 2008), CCTs appear designed to make more governable, compliant, and highly productive populations out of the poor.

Related to these governmentality debates, several scholars also argue that CCT conditionalities evidence broader neoliberal agendas, where the intent is to mold program recipients into responsible and rational consumers who are free-willed yet reliably governable (Corboz, 2013; Peck, 2011; Peck and Theodore 2010, 2012, 2015; Saad-Filho, 2010; Standing, 2011). Though neoliberalism remains, as James Ferguson points out (2010), a slippery frame of analysis, CCTs generally evidence an underlying neoliberal logic: they are intended to induce fiscal responsibility within poorer populations whereby people come to engage with formal economic markets through rational, individual choices (see also Hickey, 2010 and Meltzer, 2013). More directly, and pulling once again from Ferguson (2010), neoliberalism in this context

can be defined broadly as the way private sphere market mechanisms and technocratic management strategies become applied to State operations, and citizens become increasingly responsible for their own individual welfare, supposedly capable of assessing risk and making sound economic decisions. As such, Ferguson argues, CCTs can be both neoliberal *and* pro-poor: despite their neoliberal underpinnings – which as he rightly points out do not necessarily make them “evil” – they make significant contributions to recipient families and represent an important shift in the way poverty is addressed by the State.

Looking to existing policy documents, there is clear indication that PBF attempts to achieve both pro-poor and neoliberal development objectives. According to Tereza Campello, head of Brazil’s Ministry of Social Development and Fight Against Hunger (MDS), PBF was launched “as part of an integrated strategy of social inclusion and economic development” (Campello and Neri, 2013: p. 15). Along with combating extreme poverty and hunger, the program’s goals also include “strengthening programs of family agriculture, defense and protection of formal employment and the extension of social security” (ibid: p. 15). Drawing on evidence published by Brazil’s Institute for Applied Economic Research (IPEA), a government-led research and public policy institution, Campello also highlights PBF’s achieved objectives for strengthening Brazil’s labor market and “reducing operational costs and strengthening the autonomy of the beneficiary” (ibid: p. 17).

Reflecting on such policy objectives, economist Alfredo Saad-Filho (2015) agrees with Ferguson that CCTs are neoliberal in their design, yet disagrees that PBF is a “pro-poor” program. It provides only humble support for those who are ostensibly destitute, he argues, and makes little attempt to address significant inequality. Recipients are guided towards formal economic markets, credit and loan programs,

and increased capitalist consumption, yet nothing is done to alter the very structures that reproduce poverty and socio-economic disparities (e.g., low wages, poor public education, underwhelming employment opportunities). Going further, Richard Ballard (drawing from Morton, 2013) observes that such initiatives recall Gramscian notions of “passive revolution,” in which modest concessions are made at the top to appease those on the bottom, “so that existing elites can manage the inclusion of marginalized groups rather than lose control as they would in a conventional revolution” (2013: p. 816). Thus the political effects of cash transfers like PBF, suggests Anthony Hall (2008; 2013), not only enable cuts to social spending in some cases; they can also entrench political patronage relationships whereby broader clientelistic networks form at the national scale. As each of these works highlight, CCT programs are intended not merely to fight hunger, but also to alter the behaviors and practices of the poor, “nudging” them (Standing, 2011) to become more compliant, governable subjects. The general consensus is that CCTs are enormously complex in their origins, objectives, and effects, and to better understand how they work on the ground – to see how they might be neoliberal *and* pro-poor (Ferguson, 2010) – further research must be carried out.

Within this broad and interdisciplinary literature on CCTs, geographers are curiously underrepresented. Though geographers have made important contributions to work on critical development (e.g., Andolina, Radcliffe, and Laurie, 2005; Hart, 2004; Wainwright, 2008) and political economic initiatives in the Global South (e.g., Peet, 2007; Peet and Watts, 2004; Roy, 2010, 2012), few have entered specifically into debates over CCTs and their effects. More to the point, geographers have helped to provide analytical insight on the political and socio-spatial implications of CCTs (Ballard, 2013; Peck, 2011; Peck and Theodore, 2010, 2012, 2015), but much rarer

are geographical field studies focused directly on CCTs themselves. As Ferguson points out (2010, 2011), there remain numerous questions regarding flows of power and the diverse effects of initiatives like PBF. Echoing Li (2007; 2009), he acknowledges the very real benefits of CCTs, and he speculates whether these programs might in fact produce new lines of flight that subvert governance technologies and mobilize more active and empowered forms of citizenship. These are not questions, he writes, “to be answered theoretically or ideologically; the only answer that really convinces is the empirical and experimental one: Let us find out!” (2011: p. 67). Beginning in the next section I take up Ferguson’s challenge, arguing that, indeed, the geographic effects of PBF are broadly diverse, often mismatching with State objectives and *governmentalized* technologies designed to produce uniform, docile citizen-subjects. My analysis focuses on the effects of differing administrative scales (e.g., municipal, state, federal) and how CCT programs, particularly in rural areas, reshape a host of underlying geographies (migration, urban development, economic growth, spatial connectivities, etc.). As my findings show, neither people nor the Brazilian State engage PBF in especially predictable ways, and the ramifications this holds for governance, space, and neoliberal capitalism shed light on broader futures of political economic development in the Global South.

Data for this article were collected from 2013-2014 during two rounds of fieldwork in Ceará and Piauí. Both trips to the field lasted for two months, and on the second trip I returned to many of the same areas I visited the first time. My research design involved three primary modes of investigation: 1) interviews, document analysis, and participant observation with state actors and institutions involved with the Ponta Fina dispute; 2) interviews and participant observation with residents living in Ponta Fina, and; 3) interviews with local experts living near to the region, along

with archival and historical document analysis. With respect to the first of these data collection strategies, I conducted participant observation and semi-structured interviews with State actors ($n = 18$, including several follow up interviews) working at institutions such as the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), the Cearense Institute of Research and Economic Strategy (IPECE), and politicians and municipal workers connected to the Ponta Fina region. These interviews queried ongoing reasons for the territorial dispute, opinions on why it remained unresolved, and the most difficult challenges faced by Ponta Fina residents. I also reviewed documents, maps, and technical reports produced by these institutions to gather basic data as well as to gain insight regarding the State's vision of the Ponta Fina region (see for example Scott, 1998).

My second mode of data collection involved semi-structured interviews with Ponta Fina residents ($n = 22$, including 11 follow up interviews) and sustained periods of participatory observation fieldwork in the region. My questions to residents focused on the daily challenges they confronted, municipal infrastructure needs and future concerns, their engagements with citizenship (e.g., public education, public healthcare, State agencies, voting and politics), and interactions with the State more generally. Initial participants were identified through contacts outside of Ponta Fina, and subsequent participants were enlisted through snowballing techniques. I also traveled extensively throughout Ponta Fina to visit resident communities, and this was important for understanding the landscape and spatial (dis)connectivities of the region. And finally, my third mode of investigation involved interviews with regional experts ($n = 5$) in Sobral, Ceará, and Parnaíba, Piauí, in order to understand historical underpinnings of the dispute and the geographic and political economic reasons for its continuance. These interview data were useful for rounding out 'expert' opinions on

the subject matter, as well as for shedding light on broader political and socio-economic processes at work in the Ponta Fina region.

BOLSA FAMÍLIA AND GOVERNMENTALITY IN THE PONTA FINA REGION

On the final ten days of every month, in small cities and towns across the Brazilian Northeast, long lines of people wait outside local branch offices of Brazil's Federal Savings Bank (*Caixa Econômica Federal*). Each of them holds their family's PBF account card – which looks and functions much like a debit card – and they wait to have their monthly PBF allowance credited to their account. For reasons relating to the conditionalities of CCT programs, in addition to Brazil's own penchant for bureaucratic (over)administration (e.g., Faoro, 1975), PBF monthly allowances are not transferred automatically each month to recipient families: someone, physically, must present the card on a certain day each month at their local branch of the Federal Savings Bank in order to have the money credited to the family's account. So many people receive the benefit, and the process of attending to each individual family is inevitably slowed by questions and complications, that the procedure must be drawn out over several days. And so for ten days at the end of each month, in front of Federal Savings Bank branch offices all over the Northeast (as well as elsewhere in Brazil), millions of people wait in line to receive their monthly PBF benefit (see Fig. 2).

(Figure 2 about here.)

Such protocols draw attention to how governmentality undergirds development initiatives such as CCT programs (cf., Hickey, 2010; Hossain, 2010; Li, 2007; 2009; Meltzer, 2013; Sener, 2015). Bodies are pinned down to certain locations at given times, people present themselves to the gaze and oversight of the State apparatus, desired behaviors and practices are induced through incentivized schemes,

and a more compliant, docile, and productive society is engineered through non-coercive means. As Foucault would have it (2007), a pastoral relationship of good governance between the population and the State is made possible, whereby the former is meant to respect and even seek out the oversight and guidance of the latter. Poor people become “patients” of the State (Auyero, 2011), and the waiting they must endure time and again reinforces their unequal position in hierarchies of pastoral governance. CCTs are beneficial to recipients, to be sure, but so too are they useful for the State: new and more reliable regimes of governance often accompany social spending initiatives.

The governmentalized effects of development programs such as CCTs are particularly evident in rural areas where people have historically had little contact with the State (cf., Li, 2007; Parsons, 2015). In countries like Brazil, levels of poverty, malnourishment, infant mortality, truancy, and so on tend to be much higher in the agricultural hinterlands than in urban areas. As such, CCTs are nearly unprecedented in their capacities to build greater levels of engagement between rural populations and the State. In regions where generations of people have rarely frequented schools, hospitals, and health clinics, children today are attending classes regularly, routinely seeing medical professionals, and receiving guidance on basic standards of hygiene and nutrition. Few places in Brazil show this trend more obviously than Ponta Fina, where until the advent of PBF in 2003 few residents had much contact whatsoever with the State.

In the last few years, however, the conditionalities required by PBF have brought a host of changes to the Ponta Fina region.ⁱⁱⁱ Whereas in the past residents sought medical attention only in the most serious circumstances, today, per PBF requirements, they bring their children for regular checkups, women receive pre and

post-natal care and counseling, and prescription medicines, in limited quantities and varieties, are available in some places. A majority of adults in Ponta Fina are functionally illiterate, but most children under the age of 18 now attend school regularly. And while household and demographic information was severely limited just ten years ago, today the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) has vastly improved census data for the region. Explained one IBGE technical expert, “Our better knowledge of this area allows us to make better interventions, to help the population and to build capacity.” To be sure, the State has a much stronger presence now than it did in years past, and just as researchers have observed with social welfare and development programs elsewhere (Ferguson, 2011; Gupta, 2012; Hossain, 2010; Li, 2007), the governmentality effects of this are easily observed in the daily practices of Ponta Fina residents.

Yet not all of these effects fall so easily under governmentality, nor is the expansion of governmentality in the region necessarily linked with more effective State governance (i.e., pastoral power). As one might expect, due in part to the requirements of PBF, residents of Ponta Fina – more than 98 percent of whom receive the benefit – have grown more concerned over the availability of resources such as public schools and health clinics. But accessing these resources, and establishing the links necessary for greater levels of pastoral governance and governmentality, are complicated by multiple factors. The first relates to the border dispute, and the difficulties residents face when they try to access State resources. Lamented Camila, a 53-year-old lifetime resident of Ponta Fina:

Two years ago we were told that now we live in Piauí, and that we needed to register with the municipality there [in Piauí]. So I went, and it’s much further away, and I was told that they couldn’t register us because according to their records we lived in Ceará. So I went back to the municipality [in Ceará], I explained what happened, and I said, ‘I have no options, what should I do?’ They told me that for a short time

we could continue as before, but that soon we would have to formally register with the municipality in Piauí because it was the law and they couldn't keep attending to us. And that's how things continue until today, thank God, but I don't know when they'll change.

Others in Ponta Fina recounted similar experiences, describing how they had been bounced back and forth between municipal and state offices in Ceará and Piauí, hearing from both sides that, *officially*, they lived in the other state. Even PBF monthly payments are at risk in the geographically ambiguous region, since the federal program is administered through municipal institutions, and thus one must secure municipal domicile in order to collect the benefit. But these examples are somewhat specific to Ponta Fina and other similarly disputed regions (of which there *are* several in Brazil and other federative republics), and do not necessarily characterize PBF or CCTs elsewhere.

In order to better illustrate how State efforts to build governance through CCT programs are regularly undermined, it is therefore useful to consider the roles of individual State actors. While the job of political and infrastructural administration in a poor municipality comes with drawbacks relating to low tax revenues and limited economic growth, there exist, in fact, federal and state spending initiatives to aid municipalities where a majority of residents receive PBF. Recognizing that such municipalities logically tend to be poorer, additional federal and state money can be made available to municipal authorities to undertake and maintain infrastructural facilities (e.g., everything from buildings and institutions to roadways, water, and electricity). The higher the percentage of low-income families in a given municipality, the more federal and state assistance authorities in that municipality can request. As such, in poor regions, it can be advantageous for municipal authorities to register and report as many low-income residents as possible, recognizing it as a potential means for filling municipal coffers.

The problem, however, is that when this money is allocated, not all of it is spent on the projects for which it is intended. Like many countries in which CCTs are at work, political corruption creates serious problems in Brazil (Avritzer, 2008; Power & Taylor, 2011), and it is perhaps not surprising that municipal authorities find ways to siphon away federal and state money intended to improve State resources for poor residents. Shoddy and corrupt political administration materializes in a host of infrastructural contexts, ranging from basic neglect and under-facilitated State institutions, to highly priced and poorly delivered public works projects. As just one example, this explains why some municipal authorities actively claim residence of poor families within their municipalities, yet deny services to those same families upon request (i.e., telling them they live in a different state/municipality). Another example, and one cited by numerous Ponta Fina residents during interviews, concerns large portions of a federal highway that runs through the region (BR-404). On the Piauí side, the road is paved, as all federal highways are supposed to be. On the Ceará side, however, the road remains unpaved, stretching eastward from Piauí for several kilometers until it nears the small city of Poranga. As one woman who lives alongside the unpaved roadway complained, “According to law, and *on paper*, this road is paved, because it’s a federal highway. According to maps, this road is paved. By definition this road *has* to be paved because it’s a federal highway. But look at it! It’s a disgrace!” The roadway thus stands as a dubious monument to State failure: despite the transportation difficulties imposed on thousands of people living in Ponta Fina – many of whom struggle to get their children to and from school each day and remain ostensibly cut off from emergency response personnel – the roadway remains unpaved, serving as a daily reminder of State dysfunction and ineptitude (see Fig. 3). (Figure 3 about here.)

What these sorts of examples help to illustrate are how State efforts to build pastoral relations of governance (i.e., governmentality) through development programs like PBF become undermined, perversely, by those very same programs. More precisely, though CCTs appear in many ways to be instruments of governmentality, they are *administered* by State actors who may or may not be concerned with broader governance objectives. Not surprisingly this is picked up on by the general population, who, despite going through the (governmentality) motions built into programs like PBF, fail to see the State as a source of good, pastoral governance. PBF recipients carry out program requirements, but to say that their engagements with the State are especially pastoral would be shortsighted: they hold little faith in the State's capabilities. They associate State actors and institutions not with 'good shepherding,' but with incompetence, negligence, and corruption. To draw on another of Foucault's metaphors (1995), it is as if the structures of Bentham's panopticon are in place, yet everyone knows there is no one who might be watching. What PBF has therefore led to in Ponta Fina is a growing sense of urgency relating to the border dispute, though not necessarily due to discourses of citizenship or governmentality. Residents scramble to secure their monthly payments and fulfill program requirements because they want the money, and State actors scramble to secure federal and state aid because they *also* want the money. State actors are preoccupied not so much with governance, nor local residents with state identity or citizenship rights, but rather both are concerned with how the border dispute could negatively affect their individual interests. Tensions within and relating to Ponta Fina have therefore escalated in recent years, but the reasons for this have little to do with issues of State presence (or abandonment) or even the border dispute itself, and instead connect much more directly to the effects of PBF.

As several researchers have rightly argued (cf., Hossain, 2010; Li, 2007; Meltzer, 2013; Miller and Rose, 2008; Sener, 2015), *motivations* behind social welfare programs like CCTs are closely linked with State power and pastoral, self-reproducing regimes of governance (e.g., governmentality). They represent strategies by which governments can induce greater intensities of administration and State presence within spaces and populations perceived to be in need of better oversight. But as evidence from one such region in Brazil indicates, the introduction of PBF has produced a rather contradictory set of effects: it has brought material benefits to residents of Ponta Fina, yet it has also intensified problems of State absence and neglect, working in some instances to undermine the broader governance objectives of the program. Some lessons here likely stem from the unique geography of Ponta Fina (e.g., the ongoing border dispute), and thus may not necessarily characterize CCTs or other contexts more generally. But what this case study certainly highlights are the ways that State efforts to establish new and stronger regimes of governance through CCT programs are sometimes undermined by State actors themselves. More to the point, a program like PBF may be engineered to produce greater levels of governmentality, but administration of the program itself can limit and in some cases even reverse these effects. The next section of this article expands upon this idea by exploring some of the geographic changes provoked by PBF, and in the penultimate section I connect these themes to broader debates over CCTs and neoliberalism. Ultimately it is my goal not to argue that PBF and other CCTs are entirely disconnected from processes of neoliberalism or governmentality, but rather to show how these processes remain incomplete and even stunted by the day-to-day practices of CCT program recipients and administrators.

CONDITIONAL CASH TRANSFERS AND GEOGRAPHIC CHANGE

Just as the effects of CCTs have been most striking among rural populations – especially with respect to reducing malnutrition, child labor, and truancy – so too have they brought significant change to many small towns and rural areas. Nowhere is this more obvious in northeastern Brazil than in locations where branch offices of the Federal Savings Bank (*Caixa Econômica Federal*) are located. As PBF recipients report to bank officers each month to receive payment, they regularly spend their money in the very same towns where branch offices are located. Economic analyses have shown PBF to have strong multiplier effects (Campello and Neri, 2013), and in rural areas these effects are especially pronounced (see also Pereira, 2015). Towns with a branch office of the Federal Savings Bank, while not necessarily home to thriving economies, tend very often to have lively market districts (cf., Handa and Davis, 2006). Several times each month residents from surrounding agricultural communities come to town, collect their PBF benefit, and buy in bulk the things they need before returning home. By comparison, towns without a branch of the Federal Savings Bank rarely have much formal economic activity and tend to remain small, agricultural villages. PBF is by no means the sole cause of such discrepancies, but since the program was introduced in 2003 these regional imbalances have grown larger.

Another important geographic change induced by CCTs relates to formal economies, particularly when considering the exchange of foodstuffs in rural areas. Remembering that PBF money is transferred onto the card of a given account holder – rather than deposited as cash into an account holder's personal bank account – recipients are limited in where they can spend their money and what they can buy. PBF cards work much like debit cards, and thus the money cannot be spent outside the formal economy or even at street markets and small stores (of which there are

many in rural Brazil). Vendors must have the necessary electronic card readers to accept PBF money, and in this way there is much regulation over where cardholders shop and what they purchase. This has introduced significant change in the lives of agricultural people, many of whom, until the advent of PBF, procured much of their food through unregulated economies (e.g., trade and barter, street and farmers' markets, gardening and gleaning). PBF has certainly not put an end to such practices, but formal economic activity has grown enormously in rural areas due to the program's spending regulations. Such trends clearly lend support to critical analyses identifying the formalizing, neoliberal objectives of CCT programs (Meltzer, 2013; Saad-Filho, 2010, 2015; Standing, 2011). And not to be overlooked in all this are the owners of large grocery stores, some of whom profit tremendously from PBF expenditures. Thanks to CCTs millions of poor people now have enough to eat, but additional winners, especially in rural areas, appear to be business elites who have managed to capture both direct and spillover effects from these anti-poverty programs.

From a geographic standpoint, these changes indicate strong links between policy initiatives like PBF and formal economic development in small towns. The more PBF recipients a town and/or municipality can capture, the more capital is likely to be injected into both public and private (formal) enterprise. This lesson is by no means lost on municipal and business leaders – the divisions between which are often hard to tell – and can in some cases provoke poaching tactics along municipal and state borders. As evidence from Ponta Fina suggests, state actors sometimes take advantage of cartographic ambiguities to advance both municipal and state borders. The real crux of the Ponta Fina border dispute, as it happens, lies in a battle launched by state representatives in Piauí who claim that Ceará has tried to push its border

westward in recent years (Peixoto, 2012). For decades this territorial dispute has existed, with neither side paying much attention to the land or people in the middle. In recent years, however, the dispute has intensified politically, with neither state wanting to give ground. There are some in the region who speculate that control over natural resources and/or mining rights may have sparked these recent debates, but a broader analysis suggests that PBF may in fact lie at the root. Most everyone in Ponta Fina is quick to point out that infrastructural improvements have come almost exclusively in the last ten years, and that with PBF has also come increased political attention. Clearly a number of factors are at stake in this border dispute, but perhaps the key issue today is not so much territory or natural resources, or even labor or capital investment, but the residents themselves and the CCT money that follows them.

Connected to this are strategies used by municipalities to expand their territory and population bases. A common tactic, according to analysts with the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), is to establish new schools and health clinics in the far reaches of one's municipality in hopes of luring residents who live across the municipal border. Whether people actually move their place of residence hardly matters: with their children in school and documentation from a local health clinic, families can often report they have migrated to officials in their 'new' municipality, and their records – and PBF registration – will be transferred. Rarely is there much groundtruthing to verify migratory change. Municipal officials, for their part, responded during interviews that such measures were necessary to provide better resources to under-facilitated areas. Residents on the outskirts of rural municipalities tend to be some of the poorest and, indeed, most infrastructurally underserved (see also Parsons, 2015). Yet when those same officials felt *another* municipality was

trying to win over their population, they often complained of territorial encroachment and appealed to the IBGE for cartographic verification using GPS coordinates. These disputes are especially common today in the Ponta Fina region due to geographic ambiguities, but they are by no means unique to the area. According to IBGE and municipal officials alike, these sorts of battles exist throughout Brazil and are indeed connected to federal and state resources (viz., money). PBF is of course not to blame for all of this geographic flux, but what findings from this case study in Ponta Fina certainly highlight are the links between CCT programs and geographic change. Not only are population numbers under increased scrutiny, but maps and territorial boundaries are being contested – and in some cases even refined – as State actors seek federal resources.

According to Staduto, Nascimento, and Souza (2014), migration patterns in northeastern Brazil have also changed significantly since PBF was inaugurated. Female outmigration from rural areas increased enormously since 2003, to the rate of almost twice that of men. Their research shows that young women especially are leaving rural areas for more urbanized ones. With few employment prospects for women and local cultural attitudes that offer little more than housework and childrearing, young women are moving in large numbers to towns and small cities. While the researchers do not identify any causal relationship between PBF and female outmigration, there is much evidence to suggest that the CCT program plays an important role. For example, per PBF conditionalities, record numbers of rural children are now completing secondary school. Combined with increasing levels of (formal) economic activity in many small towns and urban areas – fueled by Brazil's growing export economy of primary commodities and expanding middle class (cf., Lapola et al., 2014) – rural areas now have a more educated labor force and rising

employment opportunities. It is hardly a stretch, therefore, to suggest that PBF expenditures connect in many ways to these new migration trends. As Staduto et al. (2014) conclude, there are a host of migration factors at work in the Brazilian countryside and agricultural settings elsewhere, and not least among issues to deliberate are the effects of CCT programs.

Finally still to be considered are expanding transportation networks in regions like Ponta Fina. As more children commute daily to school, and rural families visit towns and urban areas with greater frequency, transportation demands are on the rise in Brazil and other countries where CCTs are at work. Thanks in large part to government tax and credit incentives, the number of motorized vehicles on Brazilian roads has more than tripled since the start of the twenty-first century (Jones & Azevedo, 2013). Motorcycle ownership in particular has skyrocketed, and even in poor areas like Ponta Fina, many families now own a motorcycle or scooter. But with more transportation options, and also more reasons to commute, demand for better roadways has gained momentum in the Brazilian countryside. In the Ponta Fina region, small construction crews are now at work nearly every day on roadways and transportation infrastructure (see Fig. 4). Perhaps surprisingly, this push to create, improve, and pave more roads has not been led solely by isolated residents: many municipal leaders now recognize the importance of transportation networks in rural space. As one official noted during an interview, it is in “everyone’s” best interest to improve the geographic connectivities in the region. Discussing roadways in and around Ponta Fina, he explained:

Children need to go to school everyday, so it’s important they’re not impeded by a precarious road. If they can’t go to school, you know what happens? It’s not just the child and their future that suffers. The family of that child will lose *Bolsa Família*, and so many more people will suffer. But it’s not just that; this is what I try to explain to people here in the city. The commerce of this city is very dependent on

everyone who lives in the region, you understand, when they come to town to buy and sell things. So the more access people in the countryside have, the easier it is for them to come to town. This is good for them, it's good for commerce, it's good for vendors in the city. Everyone realizes the benefits.

Implicit in such comments is the obvious fact that if families cannot fulfill PBF requirements because of poor access to schools, health clinics, or State institutions, then municipal centers also stand to lose much needed PBF expenditures. Much like other geographic changes, it would be unfair to suggest that PBF alone has induced the expansion of transportation networks in Ponta Fina, but like with other examples, this case certainly draws attention to the very broad effects of CCTs in rural areas.

(Figure 4 about here.)

In many respects, these sorts of geographic changes point toward the intensification of neoliberal governance (i.e., governmentality – see for example Meltzer, 2013; Li, 2007; Miller and Rose, 2008). The State accomplishes more regulation and control over economic activity; there is the manipulation of space and cartographies; mobility and the movement of bodies are directed; and, ultimately, the population and their daily practice appear to be made more pliable and consistent. From one perspective, a geographic analysis supports findings that CCT programs promote the expansion of neoliberalism and governmentality, especially in rural areas (Ferguson, 2010; Hossain, 2010; Peck and Theodore, 2015; Saad-Filho, 2015; Sener, 2015). But what CCTs attempt to accomplish and what they ultimately produce are not necessarily the same. In much the same fashion that CCTs can work to undermine pastoral relations of State governance, so too can populations fail to reproduce neoliberal ideologies and consumer characteristics in especially predictable ways. In the penultimate section of this article I explore this topic, drawing from examples of how Ponta Fina residents engage PBF on a daily basis. Ultimately it is not my

argument that CCTs are devoid of governmentality or neoliberal intentions, but rather to show how the outcomes and effects of these programs fail to match statecraft objectives.

NEOLIBERALISM AND THE DIVERSE EFFECTS OF CCTS

A common grievance among the middle and upper classes in Brazil today is that PBF de-incentivizes work and makes recipients dependent upon government handouts (Soares, 2013). The argument, just like in many CCT countries, is that poor people prefer welfare to work, and families who *do* work hard risk losing their PBF eligibility. So rather than look for work, some believe, poor people would rather lay about, happily unemployed and collecting PBF benefits. Such opinions were expressed often in small towns near to Ponta Fina, where residents complained that “people of the countryside” no longer worked or even sought employment. Some went so far as to suggest that women were having more children in order to collect additional PBF money. Evidence for such statements, they claimed, could be found in municipal employment problems: in their experience it had become more difficult to find reliable service sector employees. In particular, many employers complained they could find no one to fill entry-level, minimum wage jobs. PBF was ruining Brazil’s economy, many grumbled, and at the root of the problem was the Worker’s Party (PT).

As it happens, there is very little published research to support such perceptions. Fertility rates have in fact dropped in regions where large percentages of the population receive PBF (Campello and Neri, 2013), and if the program has had much effect on labor markets, data suggest it may actually boost participation, at least for working age men (Soares, 2013). Hall (2013) provides nuance to these debates, suggesting that PBF likely incentivizes informal economic activity as recipients are

reluctant to disqualify themselves from program benefits. Nevertheless, the general consensus among researchers is that PBF and other CCTs are rarely detrimental to labor markets, and in some cases may in fact stimulate opportunity risks and entrepreneurialism (Pereira, 2015).

The concerns expressed by employers near to Ponta Fina, however, deserve revisiting as they reflect some of the not-so-neoliberal effects of CCT programs. In the first instance, it may likely be true that PBF has made it more difficult for employers to fill low-paying jobs, and reasons for this are fairly obvious: 1) with increasing levels of education (albeit modestly so) among the poor, and growing employment markets in rural towns and cities, some poor people are finding better job opportunities, and; 2) quite simply, many of Brazil's rural poor are no longer so desperate. They may still be part of a "relative surplus population" (Marx, 1976: p. 782), especially those who live in rural areas, but they no longer confront hunger on a regular basis. While Brazil's minimum wage has more than doubled in just the last decade, jobs that pay only one minimum wage salary continue to offer low pay for long hours. In the past, poor people had little choice, and often their options were to work minimum wage jobs or to go hungry. But PBF has given the poor more leverage, and in regions like Ponta Fina people today are less willing to work certain jobs they might have done in the past. This perspective was succinctly expressed during an interview with one man, a middle-aged lifetime resident of Ponta Fina: "Whether I work for him [i.e., some employer in town], or here in the countryside, I'm still poor. Whichever way, right? So I prefer to be poor here."

What these sorts of comments highlight – perhaps unanticipated in the designs of CCT initiatives – are the ways some people are able to use programs like PBF to keep their distance from neoliberal policies and practice. Clearly PBF is meant to

connect recipient families with formal economic markets, and even orient them towards practices of accumulation, investment, credit and risk, continued growth, and financial responsibility (recall Ferguson, 2010 – see also Campello and Neri, 2013, and Saad-Filho, 2015). And to be sure, increased formal economic activity, changing employment practices, and new migration trends all appear to suggest that such objectives are being achieved. Yet combined with these effects are others that seem in many ways counterproductive to the neoliberal goals of CCT programs. In Ponta Fina, for example, many residents noted that their waged labor had decreased in recent years, though this did not necessarily mean that they were working fewer hours. Many commented that they now had more time to “work for themselves,” conducting unpaid labor in areas such as farming and ranching, care giving, irrigation, construction, motor vehicle repair, teaching and instruction, etc. These activities, insisted interviewees, were more important to their communities and long-term needs of social reproduction than was extra money at the end of each month. Whereas in the past they had less control over the use of their labor due to extreme poverty, today they were more able to pick and choose where and when they engaged in paid and unpaid labor. Frustrating as it may be for employers in the region, minimum wage work appears to offer little appeal to rural residents who do not require the extra income.

In essence, what these findings illustrate are the ways some (mostly rural) CCT recipients are able to keep one foot in formal economies and one foot out. On a few days each month, they visit nearby towns to collect their PBF benefits and/or make purchases, but most other days they have very little engagement with the formal economy. They participate in wage labor when and where they choose to, but they are no longer compelled by low-paying jobs for fear of going hungry. Clearly CCT

designers must anticipate some of these labor market effects, but what perhaps distinguishes rural populations are their tendencies to withdraw from formal markets and modes of production for so many days each month. They are capable of producing most of their own means of subsistence, and, just as crucially, they are not especially drawn to neoliberal discourses of profit maximization and private ownership, earnings and asset growth, wealth accumulation and investment, individualism and financial planning, and so on. Or rather, for them, these sorts of benefits are more likely to come from informal economic activities than from (low) wage labor ones. Just as CCTs, per their intention, pull them into formal economic markets and regimes of governmentality and neoliberalism, so too do they enable some beneficiaries to withdraw from these very same spaces and relationships. Despite strong evidence that formal economic activity is on the rise in rural Brazil due to PBF, this small study considering the labor practices of PBF recipients in Ponta Fina suggests that some people are in fact finding ways to reduce their participation with formalized modes of production.

Just as importantly, this case study also reveals that rather than withering away, alternative economies (e.g., Gibson-Graham, 1996; 2006) are prodigious in the Ponta Fina region. Though PBF benefits are spent in the first instance in formal markets, people by no means consume all of the goods they purchase. Interviews and participant observation revealed much trade and exchange of these goods after purchase, and thus program recipients find ways to exchange PBF benefits within informal markets. Not only is this a strategy for turning PBF benefits into more desirable commodities (i.e., goods not purchasable with PBF debit cards), but it can also facilitate non-capitalist exchange for labor, favors, livestock, water usage, ground rent, transport, and so on. Moreover, with more time to “work for themselves,” many

Ponta Fina residents engaged in informal production activities that benefitted their households and income strategies (e.g., carpentry, pottery, textiles, maintenance, gardening, baking, mechanical repair). Far from weaning rural populations from alternative economies and expanding their relationships with formal ones, data from this study show that non-capitalist markets and practices and un-neoliberal ideologies and objectives are alive and well in Ponta Fina thanks *in part* to PBF. Much like with rural labor markets – where PBF seems to have sparked just as many non-capitalist relationships as it has capitalist ones – alternative economies continue to thrive in parts of rural Brazil together with neoliberal policy objectives that underpin CCT programs.

While the ongoing border dispute in Ponta Fina makes the region rather unique in many ways, the non-capitalist labor activities and alternative economies present in the area are likely widespread in much of rural Brazil. Alongside the neoliberal outcomes of PBF (e.g., economic formalization and increasing consumption – Saad-Filho, 2015) are other, seemingly unintended effects. Observations from this case study push and add insight to Ferguson’s (2010) suggestion that CCTs can produce myriad and seemingly contradictory effects. They also confirm and add flesh to Hall’s suspicions that PBF incentivizes informal economic activity (2013), though not necessarily because recipients fear disqualifying themselves from the scheme. In some cases, rural residents simply do not feel compelled to earn extra income or seek formal, wage-labor employment. Rather than being drawn to the technocratic discourses that underlie CCT programs – e.g., neoliberal ones emphasizing individual autonomy/security and accumulation/investment, and governmentality ones stressing optimized production and State engagement – recipients take a step back. They harness the program in their

own, unanticipated ways. Thus the broader economic and governance objectives of an initiative like PBF are undermined, in some cases by the very effects of the program itself. CCT schemes may indeed be undergirded by neoliberalism and governmentality, but what they provoke, particularly in rural areas, are a host of practices that can run counter to the program's own policy objectives.

CONCLUSIONS

For most residents who live in the Ponta Fina region, State resources and governing protocol are complicated by the ongoing border dispute. To be sure, the State has a stronger presence in the region today than it did just ten years ago, but resident anxieties over this presence and how it affects their daily lives continue to persist. PBF has introduced a multitude of geographic changes, including new economic practices, migration patterns, trends in urban growth, infrastructural projects, political strategies, and so on. Local residents now have better access to schools, health clinics, formal markets, and transportation networks, and due to PBF their engagements with the State have expanded in many respects. Yet the border dispute between Ceará and Piauí obscures these processes, and the geographic ambiguity of Ponta Fina hinders the administration and reliability of CCT initiatives in numerous ways. Rather than working to resolve these issues, State actors have mostly dug in further, escalating a territorial dispute that for decades had gone almost unnoticed.

Part and parcel with this have come demographic and cartographic flux, as states and municipalities seek new ways to capture populations and territorial units. While traditional border and land disputes often hinge upon access to natural resources, geographic connectivities, capital, and labor, evidence from this case study suggests that CCT benefits may in fact lie near the center. What appears most

important for State actors near to Ponta Fina is the administration of PBF, and state and federal resources that can accompany program benefits. Their fight seems less about rights to the landscape, and instead about rights to the population. They seek to wrangle in more PBF recipients and the money that follows them. While admittedly there are several attributes that distinguish the Ponta Fina region and this case more generally, findings from this study undoubtedly hold broader ramifications for other CCT programs. Indeed, the geographic effects of CCTs remain vastly understudied, and similar processes are almost certainly at work elsewhere, particularly in federative republics like Brazil.

In addition to examining the geographies of programs like PBF, this article has also attempted to shed new light on debates over neoliberalism and governmentality and their connections to CCT initiatives. As Ferguson points out (2010), CCTs appear both neoliberal *and* pro-poor, yet more empirical research is needed to understand how they operate on the ground. Though this case study represents only a small step in this direction, the results indicate that neoliberal and governmentality objectives built into CCT programs co-exist alongside a host of seemingly paradoxical effects. In the case of governmentality, CCT program administration and the actions of State actors themselves can undermine critical networks of pastoral governance; and in the case of neoliberalism, ideologies of individualism, economic security, consumerism, and market formalization remain incomplete due to the ways CCT recipients make use of program benefits. Crucially, in both cases, it appears that broader governance aims built into CCT initiatives can in fact be stunted by the effects of the programs themselves. This is not to argue that CCTs are not intended to induce neoliberal and governmentality relationships, but instead to recognize *how* and *why* these programs sometimes fail to do so. Additionally, in the case of large and very diverse countries

like Brazil, it would appear that important CCT differences exist between urban and rural spaces.

Still to be considered are more robust studies of CCTs and their relationships to governance. Both ethnographic and quantitative data are needed to understand the roles of CCTs in processes of geographic change, and the ways they connect to capitalist (and non-capitalist) development paradigms and networks of State power. Related to this are questions of citizenship, identity, and gender, and the day-to-day changes induced by CCT programs in recipient households. As evidence from Ponta Fina suggests, PBF may be having a profound impact on female outmigration in rural areas, and the ramifications this holds for family structure, gender roles, and strategies of social reproduction are yet to be fully investigated. Moreover, findings from this study highlight important differences between urban and rural space, and the ways CCTs manifest differently in each one. More research is needed not only to better understand geographic processes of governance and development, but to also recognize changing attributes between urban and rural areas. Ultimately, as I have tried to show in this article, exploring the links between CCTs and political geographic change in developing countries is crucial for analyzing contemporary governance, development, space, and the State. This article provides a humble step in this direction, and contributes, I hope, to further debates of State power and development in the Global South.

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ENDNOTES

ⁱ There is no widely accepted or commonly used name for the disputed region. Perhaps most often it is referred to as the *Ibiapaba* or the *Serra da Ibiapaba*, though these names are also used to describe the region more generally and do not indicate the border dispute specifically. Throughout my research, when I spoke to people in the field, I referred to this area as “the disputed area” (“*a área de litígio*”) between Ceará and Piauí. I could find no other moniker that was broadly recognized.

ⁱⁱ Throughout this article I refer to both ‘states’ (i.e., provincial units within federative republics like Brazil, Mexico, the U.S., etc.) and ‘States’ (e.g., opposite civil society, the broader governance apparatuses usually located at the national scale). To avoid ambiguity, I refer to the former as ‘states’ (i.e., not capitalized) and the latter as ‘States’ (i.e., capitalized).

ⁱⁱⁱ Unless otherwise noted, the data, quotes, and observations in this article come from interviews and fieldnotes recorded by the author while conducting research in the Ponta Fina region.